

# Bits and Pieces of My Life

Jean Wells

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Cover: 10 Rue Hoffman, Bourg-La-Reine (Seine)  
Jean and Christiane LePennec and Jean Wells  
in front of their apartment house, 1948.

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# Bits and Pieces of My Life

# What's in a Name?

The name on my birth certificate is Jean Martine Goodman. I was the fourth child in the family and got the name Jean because my dad liked it. Apparently many other dads did, too, because there were always one or two other Jeans in my room from kindergarten through high school.

When I was a very little girl my mom often called me Jeanie-girl. All other family members just called me Jean and still do. My schoolmates also just called me Jean—except when a close friend in high school decided “Goody” would do well for Goodman. No one else picked it up, but she persisted. I liked it. A few guys called me “Saucer-Eyes,” but that didn’t catch on either.

To alleviate the boredom of just plain Jean, I changed the spelling for a year or so to the French Jeanne. I got tired of that, too. Next I copied another girl in my room who spelled hers Jeane. That lasted only briefly.

Maybe my first long-term boyfriend called me “Jeanie.” Don’t tell him, but I can’t remember. The man I married called me Jeanie from the beginning. From him I liked it. None of our friends picked it up, though.

After I’d been widowed for several years, I took dancing lessons and started going to the Senior Dances. One redheaded guy whose name was Gene—spelled in the male way—and who always appeared at the dances slightly drunk, called me Jeanie. I certainly didn’t like that familiarity from him. I told him I wanted to be called Jean. He wouldn’t hear of it. So I simply didn’t accept his invitations to dance anymore. It’s not much fun to dance with a drunk, anyway.

I’d known the bandleader for years, having worked with him as a violinist in casino show bands. He started calling me Jeanie. I told him my name was Jean and that’s what I preferred to be called. Talk about deaf ears! So I started calling him Paulie, and he didn’t like that at all, was very offended. I explained that’s just what he was doing to me. He chose not to get the point.

Why am I personally so sensitive on this issue? In my heart I still save the privilege of calling me Jeanie for my long-gone husband. I’m sure people use Jeanie to gain a sort of intimacy with me. But maybe I’m not ready for that.

One woman at the senior dances started calling me “Little Squirt.” I finally, after several weeks, asked her not to do that, that I thought it was degrading. She said, “Well, then, what can I call you?” I answered, “How about Jean.”

# My Wedding Day

It began as a cool Saturday morning in late March, 1945, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It was not a long planned for wedding. Tommy, my fiancé of ten days, and I had decided the previous evening, during intermission of the Minneapolis Symphony concert, that we would get married the next morning at the downtown courthouse. Right away we found a pay phone, and I called my parents with the news and invited them to come along with me to the courthouse. Saturday morning they were as ready as I to take the streetcar downtown and to meet Tommy at 10 A.M. Tommy had called a friend and her husband and invited them to come as our witnesses. The woman had attended junior college with Tommy in St. Joseph, Missouri.

We all met at the courthouse on time except for Tommy. I sort of wondered if he had changed his mind. But he did show up about 20 minutes late, because he hadn't known the streetcar schedule was different on Saturdays than on weekdays.

We did manage to get directed to a judge who would perform the ceremony, and then we had to wait our turn. When we finally got into his chambers, the judge said he couldn't marry us because I was too young. My dad countered that I was 19 years old, and that my birth had been registered in this very courthouse. The judge accepted that and performed the ceremony.

The one touch of humor in it was that when Tommy, in repeating what the judge had said, said instead, "I, Charles, take you, Jean, to be my waffly-led wife." But we didn't laugh about that until much later. And although his legal name was Charles, his nickname had always been Tommy and everyone called him that.

My mother was upset because the judge accepted the expected payment of \$10. It was way back in 1945 and \$10 was worth much more than it is now. My mother thought the judge should marry service men for nothing. Tommy was a soldier in uniform, albeit a student at the University of Minnesota in the Army Specialized Training Program studying German.

After the ceremony we parted company with the others. Tommy's friends had gifted us with a paid apartment near the university for one week, after which Tommy was due to be shipped out. We stashed our belongings in the apartment and then took the streetcar downtown to a Chinese restaurant for lunch, and then to a movie, "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn." It was a pretty depressing movie, but I can't even remember the plot now.

We returned to the university area, bought a few groceries, and spent the rest of the day in our temporary apartment. There must have been many such informal weddings in those war years. But since I'd never dreamed of or even wanted a big fancy wedding, I was completely at peace with ours.



*Jean and Tommy, March 24,  
1945.*

# A New Beginning

In June of 1947 it was a time for change in our lives. My husband, Tommy, had just graduated from the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, and I had finished my sophomore year there. During the year 1946-47 we had become friends with Julius Lichtenstein and his family. Julius had been one of Tommy's teachers in the Army Specialized Training Program in German. He was a German-Jewish refugee who, with his family, had escaped from Europe during the war and gotten to the United States. In the course of our friendship that year Julius suggested that we go to school at the Sorbonne in Paris for a year. What an outrageous notion! Except that as we thought more about his suggestion, we learned that the GI Bill would pay for a veteran's tuition and books and give him a monthly stipend, even abroad, so we became genuinely enthusiastic about the idea. As a soldier Tommy had already spent some time in Paris just after the war playing piano in a soldier show.

Because the GI Bill did not pay for transportation anywhere, we knew we'd have to earn enough money for our boat trip to and from Europe as well as travel to other countries we hoped to visit. The fact that wages were higher in California than in the Midwest decided us to go west. Having no car and not enough money to pay rail or bus fare, we chose to hitchhike. We'd done it once before, in 1946, from Minocqua, Wisconsin, to Chicago and back, a relatively short trip but with no ill effects.

The June day we left Minneapolis we got as far as Des Moines, Iowa, where we slept the night on hard wooden benches in the bus depot. Heck, I was 21 and Tommy 23—what did we know. Mercifully, no one told us to leave.

Next day, enroute again, we were picked up by a trucker who, not long after, ran his truck into a ditch. Because he needed to call a tow-truck to pull the truck out, he asked us to walk on—that he wasn't supposed to carry passengers anyway. That minor accident left me squeamish about all drivers for quite a while. I didn't even know how to drive, and I discovered that not everyone who did know how, knew how very well.

We did get to our destination that same day, Red Oak, Iowa, where my older brother and his family lived. To our surprise my sister-in-law was in labor, and my brother took her to the hospital while we stayed with their three-

year-old son, Ricky. A couple of hours later, Harold and Shirley returned. It had been a false alarm. The baby was really ready two weeks later.

Next day Harold drove us to St. Joseph, Missouri, where Tommy's parents lived. All went well with that brief visit, except my mother-in-law put my treasured brand-new pedal pushers into a bleach solution and now they never looked again.

From there we went to Canon City, Colorado, where Tommy's Aunt Eloise and his tobacco-chewing Uncle Les had a ranch with several horses, one cow, several chickens, a small vegetable garden, and a huge area filled with old cars, ice boxes, tools, and whatchamacallits. Uncle Les' occupation was trading things. He took us out riding horses one day. I'd been on a horse only once before, and Tommy never. When my horse went close to a tree and I was in danger of being knocked off by a big branch, I immediately lay down on my back and got only slightly scratched by the branch. I was relieved when we got back to the house. Tommy was even more relieved. Because Uncle Les was a racial bigot, we had some interesting shouting matches. We also had marvelous fresh cherry pies—the overindulgence in which had me up sick one night. We took away very special memories of Uncle Les and Aunt Eloise.

Our next big stop was Denver, and en route to it we were awed by the Rocky Mountains and their gorgeous red earth. We'd never seen anything like them. In Denver we stayed with a close friend of Tommy's from junior college in Missouri. He worked at a radio station, and somehow he got word to the press about our adventure. One newspaper wanted to do an article on us with pictures, but we declined, feeling safer being anonymous on the road. And how many people who might have read the article did we think might see and recognize us on the road?

Sometime after Denver we were picked up by a family that fit the old Okie's stereotype. The man drove with one arm around his wife and one leg out the window. A box of soda crackers was part of the family. His driving style did not inspire confidence, so Tommy finally said, "Jeanie, since you're not feeling well, I think we'd better get out at the next good place to stop." And we did.

Somehow, by hitching in two or three other cars, we got to Wells, Nevada, where a lawyer from St. Louis, Missouri, picked us up in a brand new car. He was going all the way to San Francisco, so he was happy to have our company, even buying us lunch. We had a big discussion about the Golden Gate Bridge. He insisted it was the Bay Bridge that went from the East Bay to San Francisco. Since we had thought the Golden Gate Bridge was the only bridge to San Francisco, that was hard to swallow. We did eat crow.

We'd spent probably a month making the Minneapolis to San Francisco journey, staying here with friends and there with relatives, and occasionally in the cheap Milner Hotel chain. It was a leisurely trip over new country—a kind of celebration of our new freedom—leaving our families behind.

In San Francisco we found a modest apartment, and we both got jobs. Tommy earned more than I did—he was an excellent typist. We saved his salary to use for boat fare to Europe and other travels. I'd never learned to type, so I got a job with a health insurance company and balanced the monthly payment books of lots of state organizations.

When we weren't working we did obtain our passports, acceptance to the Sorbonne in Paris, and tickets on the Queen Elizabeth for a five-day trip across the Atlantic Ocean.

Several years ago when I told my thirteen-year-old granddaughter that her granddad and I had hitchhiked across the country when we were young, her eyes opened very wide, and I could see her esteem for me rise like mercury in a thermometer.

# Homage to the Gardener in My Life

**M**y late husband Tommy's favorite hobby was gardening. Mine wasn't. So when seed catalogues arrived in the mail during the winter, Tommy perused them with great interest, ordering some new seeds every year. In early spring he'd turn part of his study or some other space in the house into a greenhouse. He loved getting a head start on mother nature for later planting outside.

He took enormous pleasure in the whole gardening process—even in keeping all his gardening tools clean and well-sharpened. Some years he prepared brand-new beds while other years he might enlarge the already existing ones. He was conscientious about adding just the right amount of organic material when turning the soil annually.

Gardening was the perfect hobby for a person who spent his work day as teacher and administrator. To be out in the fresh air and sunshine, to be digging, weeding, loosening up soils—these were truly joyful things to him. To succeed with eggplant was perhaps his greatest triumph. On evenings when he would bring in a basket of newly picked vegetables, his radiant smile said it all.



*Tommy Wells gets a bed ready for vegetables.*

One year so many birds were picking at his just emerging vegetable patch that he constructed an elaborate wire house over it for protection. Somehow one bird got inside anyway but couldn't get back out again. Tommy rescued him and no more birds found their way in.

Having listened to my desire for some green flowers to add to my copious bouquets, one year he put in bells of Ireland. That year I had the most

delightful new blend of colors to put into my vases. Another year, on viewing a newly arrived catalogue, he came running to me, saying, "Jeanie, they've developed a green zinnia!" And grow them he did.

Along with growing vegetables and flowers, Tommy was eager to plant trees. Our new tract house in Sparks, Nevada, came complete with one tree. Five years later, when we sold that house and moved to Reno, there were fourteen trees in our big yard. Not all the same kind and not all the same size, but they made our house much easier to sell on a then glutted market. The most whimsical gardening experience I remember was the year Tommy didn't notice where his pumpkin vines were growing. Come fall and a close-by crab apple tree branch had three pumpkins perched on it.

Gardening still isn't my hobby. I content myself with maintaining the status quo among the perennials and keeping the many bushes in trim. And I remember with great pleasure the enthusiasm Tommy always brought to gardening and the welcome tangible results.

# A Special Walk in the Park

On a perfect autumn morning I decided to go for a walk in Idlewild Park beside the Truckee River in Reno. There were more kinds of deciduous trees there in their fall splendor than in my own neighborhood. It was an absolute riot of reds and goldens. The sky was super-beautiful blue, with clouds as pure white as my sunbleached sheets. The river was singing merrily. Everything was in tune with the wonderful day. I walked on the gently curving one-mile path I was used to, greeting all the walkers going in the other direction with an irrepressible smile, returned by all.

En route back to where I had parked my car, I was astonished to see a couple walking in my direction, tapping white canes on the asphalt path—a rather tall man with a nice build, and a small dark-haired woman. They looked to be in their forties. As I approached them they stopped while the woman took time to blow her nose. I said, “Isn’t this a lovely day to walk in the park, even if you do have to stop to blow your nose.” They both burst out laughing.

They asked me what kinds of things were in the park. From where we were standing, I could see the kiddies’ park and I mentioned the merry-go-round, the train, and the other playground equipment. The woman asked where the train went. “Just in a nice big circle behind some trees,” I answered. Then she asked if there was a place to eat. “Well,” I said, “there is a little snack bar near the rides.”

The man told me he hadn’t been in this park since he was a child. Then he asked me, “How far do you think we should walk?” I told him I always walked one mile and then came back. It occurred to me if they got off the path on which they could hear their canes tapping, it could be dangerous. There were inclines down to the river one could easily fall down if one didn’t know they were there. I suggested that they be sure to stay on the path. They had been going hand in hand when I first saw them. Because he mentioned the pigeons, perhaps he could see a little bit, or maybe he just heard them, I didn’t know. I suggested they turn back when there were no more very tall trees shading the path and that they would be able to tell by how much warmer the sun felt.

The man thanked me for the information and on they went, hand in hand, tapping their canes. Surely they were enjoying the fresh air, the gentle breezes and the warmth of the sun. What courage it must have taken to come out to the park. How had they gotten there? If they needed more help along the way, surely God would provide it.

# The Meeting

A few years ago I was very involved with several members of a Taiwanese immigrant family. The association began when I was asked to tutor one of the young women, Huey Chyn Lin, in English. Her sister, Sue Jean, was already fluent in English. Sue Jean was a full-time student at the University of Nevada and also held down a job at the Sierra Pacific Power Company.

One day when I ran into Sue Jean on campus she said to me, "There's a young doctor coming from Taiwan to meet me soon. Both my parents and his are hoping we will like each other and that it will lead to marriage." Knowing Sue Jean was busy all day every day, I said, "I'll entertain him one of the days while he's here." Sue Jean was delighted.

I picked up the young man, whose name was Lee, on a weekday morning and right away told him, "I'm taking you to Pyramid Lake. It's on an Indian reservation only about 30 miles north of Reno." Lee became very excited by the prospect and told me, "I've been watching cowboy and Indian movies on television all my life, so this will be really important to do." I found Lee very good looking, and I was amazed at how good his English was since he'd never been to the United States before. It made it so easy for us to talk and laugh together.

Lee was predictably impressed with the awesome blue of Pyramid Lake. Together we strolled up and down a couple of the beaches. He enjoyed watching the few pelicans flying around as much as I did, and he gathered up a few shells to take home. He mentioned there were no teepees around, so I explained that the Paiute Indians here had lived in conventional wooden houses for many years.

I suggested we stop at the little Sutcliffe Café on the reservation for a cup of coffee before going home. Lee was agreeable. As we sat at the counter drinking our coffee and chatting, I noticed two men sitting in a booth together talking. One of them was obviously an Indian. I decided I'd like to take Lee over to their booth. Lee was more than willing. I said to the men, "This is my friend, Lee, from Taiwan. He's just arrived in the United States on a visit and has never seen an Indian in person before." The Indian smiled broadly, raised one foot in the air, and said, "My boots were made in Taiwan."

## Going to Europe

In September of 1948 Tommy and I did indeed take the Queen Elizabeth from New York City to England, stopping there for two weeks to get acquainted with my dad's family, which is another story. Then we took a small boat across the channel to France. We found out where the railway station was and took a train to Paris. We stayed in a hotel there for only one night. The next evening we took a train to Bourg-la-Reine, a Parisian suburb. Julius Lichtenstein, our friend who taught at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, had suggested that we get acquainted with his French friends who lived in Bourg-la-Reine. The LePennecs had hidden him and his wife from the Nazis during the war until a way was found to get them to the coast and aboard a ship to America. Julius had written them about our coming and so had we.



*Tommy and Jean on the Queen Elizabeth.*

The LePennec family of four received us with we stay with them until we found a place to was sent to sleep at a neighbor girl's house, and Jean, the boy twin, slept with his parents. Tommy and I each had a single bed that night. The next day we assured them that we would sleep together on one small bed. Then Christiane got to sleep in her own bed, and they borrowed a divan from a neighbor for Jean.

When we got up in the morning the twins had already gone to school, Papa was already at his job as a policeman, and Maman was off shopping. But breakfast was waiting for us in the kitchen: coffee, buttered bread, and buttered gingerbread. We went to Paris and stayed there until evening so



*Jean and Christiana LePenneec with Jean Wells.*

that they wouldn't have to give us dinner, too. They refused to accept any payment for food.

In only six days, through a newspaper ad, we found a room to rent in a nearby suburb. When we left the LePenneec's house, Mme. LePenneec told us not to hesitate in coming over whenever we were cold and wanted to warm up. We had been able to understand the LePenneecs and to make

ourselves understood by them to the degree that Mme. LePenneec stated that we were very congenial and actually cried the morning we left. She also said that Jean and Christiane wished we would stay—that somehow they were able to overcome their shyness around us quite easily.

Our new room was in the home of the Dariel family. The man, about thirty, was a journalist, and his wife was a violinist. They had four sons, the oldest seven and a half, and the youngest a babe in arms. A French medical student and his wife also lived there. The food at dinner was wonderful, and the dinner table conversations a real learning experience and fun. But there was absolutely no heat in our room and not much in the dining room. In the evening while we studied we wore our jackets, sweaters and bathrobes, and we wrapped our feet in the blankets, but we felt like we were freezing. We realized we couldn't live like that.

We found a room back in Bourg-la-Reine in the home of the Bertrand family. There was an outside entrance to our second-story room. Every morning Mr. Bertrand, the owner, brought us our breakfast of bread and coffee at 7:30. And he ceremoniously shook our hands and asked how we were. One day he even shook mine as I lay in bed.

Our room had a bed, a small table, two chairs, a small sink, and a chamber pot with a cover. It was emptied once a day. The heat in the room wasn't high enough but better than none. The water was very hard; and I never managed to get all the soap out of my hair; so it always looked dull.

There was a young boys' school across the street, and the boys would rush out when classes were dismissed, unbutton their pants, and just like dogs, take a leak against the tree on the boulevard. Must have been acceptable

behavior at the time—maybe it still is.

We ate dinner alone in the Bertrand's dining room. The young son served us and then watched us eat through a crack in the door. We had hoped to eat with the family, especially because it would have helped our French.

We finally decided that taking the train back and forth every day to Paris just took too much time. We would have to find a place in Paris. We put an ad in the *Figaro* newspaper for two days. We got several responses and followed through on each. All but one were too expensive for Tommy's \$105-a-month GI Bill stipend.

We settled into a boarding house filled with French people. We had a single large room on the second floor with a sink with hot and cold water, a wardrobe for our clothes, and a radiator that was so hot we couldn't touch it. What paradise having a room comfortably warm at last. We no longer had to wear coats, hats and mittens when we studied. The bathroom was down the hall, and the showers were up two flights of stairs. The food was mediocre, but my body told me heat was more important than good food. Our address was 14 Rue Stanislaus, and we were about a fifteen-minute walk from the Sorbonne, usually going through the Luxembourg gardens. A big church near our dwelling sounded its bells regularly.

How well prepared in the French language were we to live in Paris and to go to school there? I had had one year of college French and Tommy two. But at that time in the USA, learning a foreign language involved learning to read and write correctly, not speaking or understanding when spoken to. The method since then has changed for the better.

The course we took at the Sorbonne was for foreigners. It was called "The Course of French Civilization." Many different classes were offered. Among them Tommy and I chose "The History of French Philosophy." It was spread out chronologically over the two semesters. We also chose "French Literature" starting with the Middle Ages and going up to the nineteenth century over the two semesters. We took copious notes, and every day I'd go home and look up the words the professors had used that I didn't understand. The written and oral exams at the end of each semester were in French, of course.

When we were first attending these lecture courses, I remarked to Tommy the very old man who was teaching one of our courses looked to me as if he were ready to die. Tommy didn't think so. But about a week later when we went to that class, there was a sign on the door that said, "No class today. The professor died. Class will resume again next week with a new teacher."

Everyone had to take “The Practical Course.” At the beginning before classes started, we had all taken the written examination on French and talked briefly with a professor to see how our spoken French was. There were classes for people who already knew French well, and other classes for those who didn’t. Tommy and I were assigned to a lower-level course. In that class there was mostly conversation. Also, each week we had to turn in an essay on a subject our teacher had chosen. She often told us about the hardships the French endured during the war. It had only been over for three and a half years. Among other miseries, many people gradually burned their furniture for heat.

We voluntarily took a weekly class in pronunciation, which helped enormously. Not many students attended it, but it did a great deal to get our French understandable for the French.

During the nine months we lived in Paris, besides going to our classes regularly, we took advantage of concerts and plays we could attend by buying discounted tickets for students. We saw two plays starring Louis Jouvet, the most famous actor in Paris at the time. We also saw Jean-Louis Barrault in several plays. Through an American woman friend who was



*Jean and Christiane with Tommy and mme. LePennec, Parc de Seaux.*

studying for a Ph.D. in Paris, we got to watch him teach a class in mime. He had played the role of a mime in the famous 1945 movie, “Children of Paradise.” We also saw Marcel Marceau in a play at the tiny Pocket Theatre right around the corner from our boarding house. Later he became a world-famous mime, even performing in a Reno casino as late as 2003.

One evening as we were watching a play from the upper balcony, three German men, seated together near us, began talking to us in English. One of them had been a prisoner of war in Texas. He said the POWs were well treated there. We seemed to have a lot to talk about. So we all decided to meet after the play in a bar near the theatre. There we still had lots to talk about. Tommy knew more German than I did, but with good will among us all, the talking continued for at least an hour. While going back to our boarding

house, we realized we'd never had a friendly chat with any French people when we attended a theatre or a concert. The French at that time were known for being standoffish. I think they later learned that their tourism would be more successful if they treated people more kindly.

We took the train to see the LePennecs about every two weeks on Sundays. I did get the flu in December and had to stay in bed for about a week. My dad and brother had sent us Christmas boxes filled with soap, powdered milk, toilet paper and other things we felt we needed but were still rationed or unobtainable in France. In public restrooms pages from books served as toilet paper. One Sunday morning Mrs. LePennec visited us unexpectedly to see how I was. She knew I had had the flu. My dad had included a Christmas-wrapped package marked "For the LePennecs From the Goodmans." Tommy gave her the package and she burst out crying. She wondered why he'd sent a package for them. We told her that we'd written my dad about how helpful they'd been to us, so he wanted to show his appreciation to them. He had sent them a package of chocolate bars. Chocolate bars were still very hard to come by in the Paris of 1948. She wouldn't open the package until she got home so she could share the pleasure with her family.

During the 1949 spring break Tommy and I took a French students' tour to Italy. There were eighty students in total including five Americans, two Norwegians, one African, and three Arabs. Tommy and I spent a lot of time with the African, Henry Senghor. He eventually told us his father was President of Senegal. When our group sailed from Napoli to Capri



On Capri with Henry Senghor.

for the day, we spent our time with Henry. We were astonished when some German tourists approached us and asked Henry if they could touch his hair. He obliged them. Maybe he had had that experience elsewhere in Europe. We also spent quite a bit of time with the three Arabs. I think the French pretended they weren't even there. Those particular Arabs were all university students, kind and friendly to us.

I've always enjoyed befriending people from different countries and different races. It gives me so much more perspective about life on this planet.

We managed to make a trip to Germany because my brother-in-law, Henry, was still in the Army Air Force and was stationed in Germany, near Frankfurt. My sister was with him. Relatives of servicemen in Germany got permission to get in to visit for a week. Since we knew we'd be leaving Paris



*With Arab friends in Rome.*

sometime in late June, while we were in Germany Tommy applied for a job there, working for the army as a civilian. They were happy to employ him, but I wouldn't be allowed to come along. I would have had to stay in Paris by myself. So we vetoed that idea and came home.



*Tea in Germany, Kronberg Castle.*

Little did we know that seventeen years later we would again be going to live in Paris. My husband as a French professor had a sabbatical year in 1966-67. By then he had been teaching at the University of Nevada in Reno for six years. That time we took with us our fifteen-year-old daughter, Robin, and our nine-year-old son, Conway. We did see the LePennecs several times during several years, and Jean had a

In 1978 Tommy died at age 54. When Christmas time came, I wrote a Christmas card in French to the LePennecs explaining what had happened. I wanted to keep up the annual letter exchange with Maman, but I hadn't written any French to speak of for thirty years. I could talk better than I

could write. One doesn't have to remember how to spell to talk, nor to be as meticulous about grammar. So I continued annually to write the letter, every year apologizing profusely for my errors. It must have taken me two or three hours to do a not very long letter. The French dictionary got its annual caressing—especially the area where verb conjugations are laid out. But my friends were unceasingly good-humored about my French.

In 1998 at Christmas time I wrote as usual. About three weeks later I received a response from Jean. He said my Maman from France had loved me very much. And that the letter I had written was one of the nicest she had received, but she died just a few days before turning 96. Jean and Christiane decided to entrust my letter to her casket and also a little doll they had given her just a couple years before. That was to make up for the one which in childhood, she couldn't buy. The little amount she had saved toward it, in the end had to go for something else. Family economic difficulties were already in the picture. Jean died in 2000. So just Christiane and I can continue our Christmas notes to each other, and we are grateful we can do it.



*Paris, Place de Tertre*

# The Secret Friend

**M**y next-door neighbor, Marion, had been bedridden for five years. Since we were very close friends, I had visited her three or four times a week. Her own life did not hold much interest at that time. She'd developed macular degeneration and therefore could no longer read nor even see the TV. She could still hear well, though.

Early on I decided to try reading to her on my visits—books we both enjoyed, especially James Herriot and Robert Fulghum. Her live-in daughter, Margaret, was somewhat retarded. She never came into the room to listen to the stories. Marion and I spent a lot of time laughing at the stories.

During Marion's bedridden years a hired woman came in daily to make dinner for them and then stayed all night. Marion died on Christmas Eve, 1993, aged 90. Margaret was 56 at the time. The hired woman continued to come and make dinner for Margaret and to stay all night.

I made several attempts to visit Margaret in the mornings, but soap operas were her priority then, and napping took up her afternoons. Her caretaker made it clear she didn't want me there in the evenings because that was her bailiwick.

One morning Margaret and I were chatting in her front yard when the mailman came by. When he left Margaret said, "Now that Mom's gone, there'll never be any mail except bills." A lovely light went on in my head—I could send her notes from a secret friend. So I began immediately, deciding to send one every three weeks. When she got the first one Margaret was delighted. When she got another one three weeks later she was ecstatic. She then realized even more might come and waited for the next one. She finally started keeping them in a pretty hat box.

Her sister, Joan, came by about noon almost every day to get lunch for her and to do other things that needed doing around the house. I'd sometimes drop in to see Joan, and Margaret would go to her room and get the hat box and show me all the cards she'd gotten. At first she thought the writer might be a man and that maybe they'd get married some day. Because Joan had guessed it was me doing it, she told me about that. Then I focused several notes on female concerns so she could let go of the male fantasy.

Joan told me those letters were the most important things in Margaret's life—that every time one arrived Margaret would call her up, very excited, and read it to her.

In 1999 Margaret had breast cancer surgery. So I went to sending cards every two weeks. Margaret soon had well over one hundred cards and counted them often. They were her pride and joy. She told me once if there ever were an emergency and she had to get out of the house quickly, her box of letters from her secret friend was what she'd take with her.

Margaret died of cancer in 2002 at age 65. Joan buried several of the letters from her secret friend with her.